

## Religious Liberty in Xinjiang: Terrorism, Repression, and Identity

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### Abstract:

Xinjiang Province, the far western province of China, has noted an increase in domestic terrorism as a result Uighurs that are radicalized through feelings of religious and ethnic oppression. China is also not evenly implementing its laws on religious protections. This paper suggests a change in Beijing's policy towards Xinjiang that promotes religious liberty for Uighur Muslims, which will be more conducive to Beijing's ultimate goals for peace, stability, and unity in the region.

Xinjiang province is the westernmost province in China and shares a border with much of Central Asia. It is the home province of China's Uighur population, the majority of which are Muslim, and is a province of strategic and economic interest to China because of the region's immense natural wealth of resources - such as coal, natural gas, and rare metals - and position as a link to the rest of Asia.<sup>1</sup> The region connects China to Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Russia, India, and even Afghanistan, which makes it a critical hub in China's 'New Silk Road' plan. This economic plan would increase the flow of trade between China, other central Asian countries, and the Middle East, similar to the ancient Silk Road. However, despite an increased military presence, reshuffling of Chinese policy towards Xinjiang, and government investing from radicalized Uighur Muslims who have begun making targeted terrorist strikes, the region has faced an increased number of terrorist attacks over the past several years.<sup>2</sup> Religious oppression and erasure of ethnic identity among Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims has led to an increase in the radicalization and subsequent terrorist attacks. Adopting a policy of religious liberty and tolerance towards this

ethnic minority in Xinjiang will bring stability and unity that the Chinese central government is aiming for in the region, and will allow the government to better address other issues that contribute to tensions in Xinjiang, such as economic development. Extending religious freedoms to the Uighur Muslims will bring the stability that the Chinese government seeks in the region.

### A Brief History of Xinjiang

Xinjiang, as a region, has been a part of numerous empires throughout history, even serving its own brief stint as an independent country from 1944-1949. It is home to the Uighur ethnic minority, where they constitute approximately ten million of a population of about twenty-two million, who are culturally and linguistically distinct from the rest of China. This has led to a sense of identity, critically constructed around their language, culture, and religion, that supersedes their Chinese national identity. The Uighur language is Turkic in origin, the culture is closer to Central Asian rather than East Asian/Chinese, and the people are ethnically distinct on a genomic level – closer to European than East

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<sup>1</sup> Katie Hunt, "Xinjiang Violence: Does China have a terrorist problem?" *CNN*, Last date modified: December 3, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> William Wan, "5 questions on Xinjiang Separatists, Uighurs, and knife attacks at Chinese train station." *Washington Post*, Last date modified: March 2, 2014.

Asian.<sup>3</sup> The region has been a part of China since the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of Qing Dynasty expansion, pushing out the previous ruling empire.<sup>4</sup> The region has since been administered by the Chinese government under the Qing dynasty, the Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China, although the region has, throughout the change in administration, maintained the ethnic identity and resisted governance from Beijing.<sup>5</sup>

During the political instability of the Chinese Revolution, rebels in Xinjiang, supported by surrounding countries and the Soviet Union, declared a brief period of independence and renamed the area East Turkestan in 1944. They had been driven by nationalism to attempt to establish an independent socialist Uighur-state, an ambition that the People's Republic of China stifled when the region was brought back underneath Chinese rule in 1949. However, while large, powerful, and organized voices for Uighur independence were shut down following the reunification, nationalistic sentiment persists to today. Under leader Mao Zedong, China utilized a policy of pluralism and cultural tolerance which kept cohesion and stability in Xinjiang, with some peaceful protests breaking out intermittently, and the Chinese Communist Party "between the mid-1980s and 1996[...] attained a grudging tolerance for its Xinjiang policies by a significant portion of the Uighur elites."<sup>6</sup> This is because the party allowed the Uighurs to maintain their own language and practice their religion with limited interference. The mid-1990s saw a change of China's Xinjiang policy, towards the 'Strike Hard'

policy and a rollback on linguistic pluralism in the region. Since then, the Uighur population has seen the government begin to implement a policy promoting mono-culturalism and mono-lingualism in Xinjiang by repressing Islam and Uighur language instruction.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the Chinese government has begun to take action against the growing unrest, an increase in riots, and terrorist attacks in the region. However, the heavy handed response has adversely affected peaceful Uighurs who do not participate in the protests or violent altercations.

### The Current Issue

Lately, China has seen an increasing trend among terrorist attacks executed by radicalized Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province. They are fueled by curtailing of religious rights, rollback of Uighur-language instruction in schools, and perceptions that the ethnic group is being discriminated against by not only the government, but also the Han Chinese that are moving into the region. CNN notes that:

Uyghur exile groups and human rights activists say repressive religious policies and economic marginalization have provoked much of the recent unrest. They add the education system undermines use of the Uyghur language.<sup>8</sup>

Religious oppression, cultural erosion, and economic disparity are leading to radicalization among China's Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang.<sup>9</sup> Economic development in the

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<sup>3</sup> Shuhua Xu and Jin Li, "A Genome-Wide Analysis of Admixture in Uyghurs and a High-Density Admixture Map for Disease-Gene Discovery." *American Journal of Human Genetics* 83.3 (2008): 322–336. *PMC*.

<sup>4</sup> James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, Columbia University Press. 98

<sup>5</sup> Arienne M. Dwyer, "Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse", *East-West Center, Policy Studies* 15. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Dwyer 63

<sup>7</sup> Dwyer 63

<sup>8</sup> Hunt. "Xinjiang Violence: Does China have a terrorist problem?"

<sup>9</sup> Tong Zhao, "Social Cohesion and Islamic Radicalization: Implications from the Uighur Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, 3, 40.

region has disproportionately benefitted larger corporations and increased the wealth gap, particularly between the Uighurs and Han Chinese.<sup>10</sup> Beyond that, migrant workers and the Han Chinese immigration that has constantly increased in recent years have led to the feeling among Uighurs that they are being marginalized in their own province.<sup>11</sup> The current political climate has seen targeted terrorist attacks committed by radicalized Uighur Muslims increase in recent years, a break from historical academic and peaceful protests. Such attacks have taken place in Kunming and Beijing. The global political climate has also contributed to the tensions, though not as much as domestic issues, with imported militant Islam radicalizing some Uighurs and leading them to join Daesh and to fight for the Taliban in Afghanistan. Daesh is the terrorist organization operating in Iraq and Syria otherwise known as ISIS or ISIL.<sup>12</sup> As Xinjiang becomes increasingly unstable with unrest and protests, the government increases the heavy-handedness of its response. This response is in-line with the ‘Strike Hard’ policy towards Xinjiang, which simply feeds back into the problem.

### **Current Chinese Policy**

On a holistic level, the Chinese government has a policy that promotes mono-lingualism and mono-culturalism among its ethnic groups in an effort to promote national unity with China and a singular Chinese identity. In pursuit of this, local dialect instruction is scaled back in favor of teaching Mandarin in schools, and integration with Han

ethnicity is actively promoted. This is the unofficial policy of China, while the on-paper policy is egalitarian and accommodationist.<sup>13</sup> This split policy – unofficial and official – can be seen in Tibet in regard to its culture and language as well. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping discussed a revitalized Xinjiang policy that would have three main elements: “Fighting terrorism with an iron hand, implementing development to benefit the common people, and strengthening military presence in the region.”<sup>14</sup> This is not a new policy and has been implemented for years, but only refers to Xinjiang as a whole rather than addressing the plights of the Uighur minority in any meaningful capacity. Currently, the Chinese government and state media characterize any sort of Xinjiang independence protest as terrorist in nature, be it peaceful or not.<sup>15</sup> Separatist elements within the region are subject to either harsh prison sentences or execution, and even academics not in the region are subject to harsh punishments and sentencing. In 2014, Illham Tohti, an Uighur academic who taught at Minzu University in Beijing, was accused of fermenting separatist sentiments in Xinjiang and was sentenced to life in prison, despite his peaceful and academic approach to discussing ‘the Xinjiang issue’. He had discussed the issue in his classes at Minzu University, hosted an online forum for discussion, and promoted brainstorming for answers. His family’s assets were frozen despite the fact that his wife and two young sons relied on those savings.<sup>16</sup>

The state is also heavily involved in the way that Muslims practice their religion in the

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<sup>10</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, “China Doubles Down on Economic Development in Troubled Xinjiang,” *The Diplomat*, Last date modified: May 7, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Zhao 44

<sup>12</sup> Jack Moore, “Xinjiang’s Uighur Muslims Receiving ‘Terrorist Training’ From Isis Fighters for Attacks in China”, *International Business Times*, Last Date modified: September 22, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Dwyer 2

<sup>14</sup> Tiezzi “China Doubles Down on Economic Development in Xinjiang.”

<sup>15</sup> David Volodzko, “China’s Own Double Standard on Terrorism.” *The Diplomat*. Last Date modified: November 23, 2015.

<sup>16</sup>Edward Wong. “China Sentences Uighur Scholar to Life.” *New York Times*. Last date modified: September 23, 2014.

region, through the means of state-approved Qurans, state controlled mosques, and laws against certain displays of religion.<sup>17</sup> Muslims living in certain areas of Xinjiang or hold government positions, they may not have their traditional beards and there are restrictions on the hijab and burka. These restrictions have been enforced under the idea that they disrupt the public order, and current Chinese religious policy upholds that “[displays of religion] should not be used as tools to disrupt the public.”<sup>18</sup> In an effort to ensure that religion is prevented from being used in ways that may disrupt the public, the government controls religious bodies and organization through the administration of the registration of religious bodies such as church groups and religious societies.<sup>19</sup> China does allow for mosques to be built and for individuals to practice their religion without interference, but the state has power over organized religion. The exact language of China’s policy towards religious protections can be found in article 36 of their constitution, which states:

No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The State protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State.<sup>20</sup>

The wording in the constitution suggests that all religions in China are protected, but the policy is not implemented evenly, as seen in the previous examples of government intervention in the growing of beards and wearing of certain religious clothing.

The government has also taken the stance that the key to stability in the region lies in the economic development of Xinjiang and providing income development and social mobility to the Uighur population.<sup>21</sup> To this end, the government has put Xinjiang at the center of one of the most important economic development policies that it has crafted, the ‘New Silk Road’ development project, which is intended to bring a large amount of trade and financial assets through the region. The use of military force in accordance with the ‘Strike Hard’ policy is also utilized by the local and central government, and the option of increasing military and police presence is always a possibility for those in power. Collectively, all of these policies aim towards fighting the ‘three evils’ that China faces in Xinjiang: violent terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism.<sup>22</sup>

### **Evaluation of Current Chinese Policy**

On a macro-level, the current Chinese policy towards Xinjiang has failed in its goals and has only led to further development of the issues. The radicalization of Uighurs especially revolves around two particular aspects that are the result of Chinese policy: the oppression of religious rights and the loss of language. Dwyer, a professor of Linguistic Anthropology at the University of Kansas, summed up the situation:

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<sup>17</sup> Wan “5 questions on Xinjiang Separatists, Uighurs, and knife attacks at Chinese train station.”

<sup>18</sup> Ping Xiong, “Freedom of Religion in China Under the Current Legal Framework and Foreign Religious Bodies,” *Brigham Young University Law Review*, vol. 2013, issue 3, 610.

<sup>19</sup> Xiong 610.

<sup>20</sup> Xiong 605

<sup>21</sup> Tiezzi “China Doubles Down on Economic Development in Xinjiang,”

<sup>22</sup> Julia Famularo, “Chinese Religious Regulations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: A Veiled Threat to Turkic Muslims?” *Project 2024*, 2015.

In targeting these core markers of Uyghur culture, previously slumbering sensitivities were inflamed. For language and religion are valued by most ordinary Uyghurs as central aspects of their identity. As both are considered inviolable and semi-private, significant encroachment by a dominant Chinese culture is perceived as an attack on identity.<sup>23</sup>

The promotion of Mandarin instruction and religious oppression have only fostered resistance among the Uighurs and pushed them towards radicalization, as they believe it to be the only option left to express their religion and culture, given that their peaceful protest attempts have been suppressed. This is a particularly dangerous situation when the global political climate is facing jihad from extremists in the Middle East, which has drawn some of these elements out of Xinjiang to Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. While the region has seen economic development from government investment and the development of the New Silk Road, it has been imbalanced and the groups that would benefit the most from it have not been positively affected. In this regard, the government investment has only exacerbated the income inequality and driven the Uighur population to desperate measures. The Chinese government, in its attempts to bring Xinjiang closer to China and foster a Chinese identity among the Uighurs, has only pushed the region's ethnic minority further away. A key example of this is seen with the government changing Kashgar, which was a hub of Uighur culture, into a special economic zone in an attempt to bring greater prosperity

to Uighurs. Instead, the economic change destroyed “not only old buildings, but communities and traditions as well.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Suggestion for New Policy**

The policy suggested in this paper follows the concept of ‘winning the hearts and minds of the people’. This is a concept in the theory of war, where rather than attempting to resolve a conflict through the use of superior military force, an actor instead uses intellectual and emotional connections to rally the people behind a certain cause. This policy promotes the ultimate goal of defeating the opposite force in the theater of public opinion, operating on the premise that if the people do not support your endeavor, then victory is unattainable and the situation will ultimately result in favor of the other side.<sup>25</sup> The Chinese government should move back to a policy similar to the one under Deng Xiaoping, as the Uighur public was more receptive to those policies than they are to current ones.

As it stands, the Uighur population in Xinjiang believe themselves to be mitigated, discriminated, and oppressed in their own home province, and the central Chinese government has recognized that there is evidence that leads the population to come to these conclusions. One large contributing factor to this perception of oppression among the Uighur population is the current religious policy, explored previously. This paper puts forward a policy of religious tolerance and religious liberty for Xinjiang's ethnic Uighur population by implementing the actual wording of the religious protections in the Chinese constitution. This language of religious protection must be equally enforced in Xinjiang. Currently, the Uighurs are seeing

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<sup>24</sup> Colin Mackerras, “Xinjiang in China's Foreign Relations: Part of a New Silk Road Plan or Central Asian Zone of Conflict?” *East Asia* vol. 32, issue 1. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Lewis, *American Culture of War* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas), 2013.

their religion repressed more strongly than others. By enforcing the religious protections guaranteed in the constitution, Xinjiang will see the religious liberty that the Uighurs are largely clamoring for. This liberty would allow the Uighurs, who practice a form of moderate Islam, to follow the demands of Islam, observe religious practices, and celebrate religious holidays. Given that one of the main issues between the Uighurs and the Chinese government is religious expression, this policy will ease those tensions. Furthermore, this policy aims at utilizing religious freedoms to diminish the rate of radicalization among Uighurs by allowing them to pursue their religion, turning them away from roads to radicalization and feelings of isolation and martyrdom. Beyond this allowance of worship, this will allow the Uighurs to maintain a sense of cultural and personal identity while improving their relationship with the central government in Beijing. This safe expression of religion coupled with sufficient cultural autonomy will prevent imported militant Islam in the area from taking hold.<sup>26</sup>

With the mitigation of the threat of further radicalization and subsequent terrorist attacks from Uighurs, the Chinese government can then focus on addressing economic development within the region, addressing the economic disparity between the local population and the eight million Han Chinese who have immigrated to Xinjiang. Beyond this, the government will also be able to explore the issue as to how the revenue from the economic development in Xinjiang has largely gone to larger corporations, rather than the smaller businesses, which exacerbate the economic difficulties that the ethnic minorities face in the region.

## **Conclusion**

In recent history, it has become evident how policies similar to China's 'Strike Hard' policy towards terrorism ultimately do nothing but exacerbate the problem. Two critical examples can be seen with the United States during the Vietnam War and again during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During both wars, the United States failed at effectively winning the 'hearts and minds of the people,' pushing more civilians towards joining the enemy and communism. The United States failed at undercutting the actual reasons for civilians joining the Viet Cong and Al-Qaeda, and China is currently following a similar path in regards to the Uighurs. As China continues to constrict Xinjiang religious liberty, language, and identity, the Uighur population will grow increasingly desperate and the terrorist strikes will continue in the current upward trend.

The policy in this paper would bring religious tolerance to Xinjiang, allowing the Uighur minority to maintain their religion, and by extension their language and identity. This will undercut the biggest reasons for radicalization and protest among Uighurs, and allow the Chinese government to focus less on military presence in the region. Some of the military's actions attract international criticism for the degree of force that the government responds with. A change in policy will allow China to focus more on economic development of the region in preparation for the New Silk Road and the general improvement of the ethnic minorities and Han population that are in the region. The Chinese government could do this by promoting trustworthy local Uighur Communist Party officials to positions of power, so that the Uighur population sees itself as being represented in the government. The government could also use the same precedent of giving special rights to certain minorities in

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<sup>26</sup> Dwyer 3

order to justify extending religious liberty and language opportunity to the Uighurs. These actions would boost the stability in Xinjiang in

ways beneficial to the government, and bring the country closer to national unity that Beijing pursues.

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